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INFO RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES 0955  
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA 5601  
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ MAY BOGOTA 2052  
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 0337  
RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA 0321  
RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO 3989  
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DEA FOR A, AD, AX, ADX, OC, OCX, OE, OEX, OG, OGX, OGL, OI, OIL, OM,  
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TAGS: [SNAR](#) [KCRM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PM](#) [CI](#)

SUBJECT: CHILE'S POLICE CHIEF DIES IN HELICOPTER CRASH IN PANAMA

¶1. (U) Summary: Chile's police chief, Director General Jose Bernales, his wife and some members of his delegation, died on May 29, when their helicopter crashed into a three-story building in Panama City. General Bernales and his delegation were attending a United Nations-sponsored conference on terrorism in Panama City. Bernales was committed to cooperation with the USG on transnational crime issues and will be missed, but we expect that cooperation to survive his tragic demise. End summary.

#### Helicopter Crash Kills Chilean Police and Panamanians

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¶2. (U) In Panama City on May 29th, 2008, Director General of Carabineros, Jose A. Bernales (59), his wife Ms. Teresa Bianchini, Carabinero Lieutenant Colonels Oscar Tapia and Ricardo Orozco, Captain Mauricio Fuenzalida, and Tapia's wife, Carolina Reyes, died in a helicopter crash while on an official visit to Panama. According to Chilean press, after failed attempts to land, the helicopter crashed into a three-floor department store in the highly populated Caledonia neighborhood. Panamanian police confirmed the death of at least four Panamanians at the site of the accident and many others were rushed to hospitals.

¶3. (SBU) General Bernales and his delegation were in Panama attending a UN-sponsored conference on terrorism. The 12-seat helicopter (UH 1N) was built in 1973 and purchased (for \$1) by former President of Panama Omar Torrijos, father of the current President Martin Torrijos. The Embassy has heard unconfirmed reports that the helicopter experienced other mechanical problems when flying with Panama's Vice President eight weeks ago, and had to make a hasty, unplanned landing.

¶4. (U) President Bachelet decreed three days of national mourning and flags were lowered to half-staff. Bachelet called General Bernales, who had served as Chile's chief of the police since 2005, "a great police director, an important support for the GOC on order and security matters." In November 2007, General Bernales was selected as the first President of AMERIPOL (Police of the Americas) by the representatives of the 18 member countries.

Bernales: A Modernizer

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¶5. (U) Bernales did much to modernize the Carabineros, leading them to improve their efforts to target transnational and organized crime, for example. Under his leadership, the Carabineros

significantly upgraded their airwing and groundfleet capabilities, personnel protection equipment, and forensic and electronic surveillance capabilities. Improvements to their investigative capabilities included an Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System (IAFIS) and the development of an integrated criminal database. Bernales actively labored to raise the capabilities of the Carabineros to recognized international standards, implementing modern concepts such as community policing and proactive police resource allocation and deployment strategies.

#### A Friend of the Embassy

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¶16. (U) Bernales was a close contact of the Embassy. The Carabineros collaborate with various sections within the Mission on law enforcement and national security issues such as counterterrorism and transnational criminal activity. Under Bernales' leadership the Embassy saw an unprecedented level of cooperation with Carabineros on law enforcement issues. He met frequently with Embassy law enforcement officials and, on several occasions, with the Ambassador. Bernales personally sought and realized a formal agreement of cooperation between the Carabineros and the FBI. A Carabinero liaison officer works closely with the Regional Security Office to coordinate security support and Carabineros are posted 24 hours a day at both the Chancery and the Chief of Mission Residence.

In response to demonstrations and security incidents directed at the Embassy, the Carabinero response has consistently been swift, professional, and measured. In January 2008, the Carabineros' anti-narcotics unit (OS-7) requested, for the first time, DEA's support in efforts to combat the alarming surge in transnational cocaine trafficking along Chile's northern border with Bolivia. In early May, OS-7 commanders contacted the Embassy with a request to obtain DEA-provided training for their investigators.

¶17. (U) Ambassador Simons has authorized the Embassy to lower its flag to half-staff in recognition of the national mourning period for Director General Bernales. He also expressed his condolences in phone calls to Defense Minister Goni and Interior Minister Perez Yoma, and is sending a letter to President Bachelet. Senior Embassy staff attended a May 30 mass at the Carabinero training school, and the Ambassador will attend the funeral mass currently scheduled for Sunday, June 1.

¶18. (U) General Eduardo Gordon will act as the temporary head of the Carabineros until President Bachelet names a formal successor for Bernales. Gordon had been a low-profile Carabinero officer until Bernales appointed him to be his second-in-command in December 2005. Prior to that appointment he served as the Chief of Carabineros in Valparaiso.

#### Comment

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¶19. (SBU) Chileans are in shock at the death of the leader of their much loved Carabineros. In polls, Chileans regularly rank Carabineros as the most trusted of public institutions, and the country is now in mourning. Bernales is famous for bring the Carabineros and Chilean community together. Though the Embassy has lost a committed partner in the fight against transnational crime, we do not anticipate Bernales' death to result in a deterioration of daily cooperation. The Embassy has institution-wide relationships with the Carabineros.

SIMONS